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DARCY GRIMALDO GRIGSBY

Revolutionary Sons, White Fathers,
and Creole Difference:
Guillaume Guillon-Lethière's
Oath of the Ancestors (1822)*

The scene is tearful (Fig. 1). Revolutionary soldiers swear their loyalty to France with a clamor of upraised swords. Some take leave of their wives and children. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière's picture of 1799 undoubtedly refers to—and rewrites—David's *Oath of the Horatii* (Fig. 2) exhibited fourteen years earlier. In both pictures, the fatherland is menaced and the brothers rally with arms held high on its behalf. In Lethière's painting, we see the pose of the *Horatii* reiterated (in reverse) in numerous vignettes: at center middleground, the fanning left hands of the soldiers who with their right hand lift spiking swords; at left foreground, the two men who extend a long sheathed sword and open hands towards the official on a step above them; at right, the rhyming, ornate soldiers (in uniforms designed by David), two of whom gesture to the ship while another momentarily advances from their lockstep in order to embrace his wife. As the latter detail suggests, Lethière's picture deviates from the *Horatii* in the prominence (and activity) accorded to France's female family members. It also deviates from David's picture in its absenting of the father. This, despite the fact that the painting is entitled *La patrie en danger* [The Fatherland in Danger].¹ Even in the

*I would like to thank Geneviève Marcel Capy, France's expert on Lethière and founder along with G.-Florent Laballe of the *Association des Amis de Lethière*, for her extraordinary generosity in sharing her knowledge and work with me. This article could not have been written without her scholarship. The *Oath of the Ancestors* is only available as an object of study for scholars outside Haiti because she and Laballe rediscovered it in the cathedral at Port-au-Prince in 1991 and succeeded in getting it restored by Musées de France conservators between 1995 and 1997. I also thank Jessica Dandona for her invaluable work as my research assistant in Paris, and Matthew Gerber, who is writing a dissertation on Revolutionary legislation on illegitimacy at U.C. Berkeley, for directing me to appropriate sources, including his own scholarship.

1. Philippe Bordes, "La patrie en danger par Lethière et l'esprit militaire," *La revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 4–5 (1986), 301–306. Of course, in its foregrounding



Figure 1. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, *The Fatherland in Danger*, 1799. Oil on canvas. Musée de la Révolution française, Vizille.

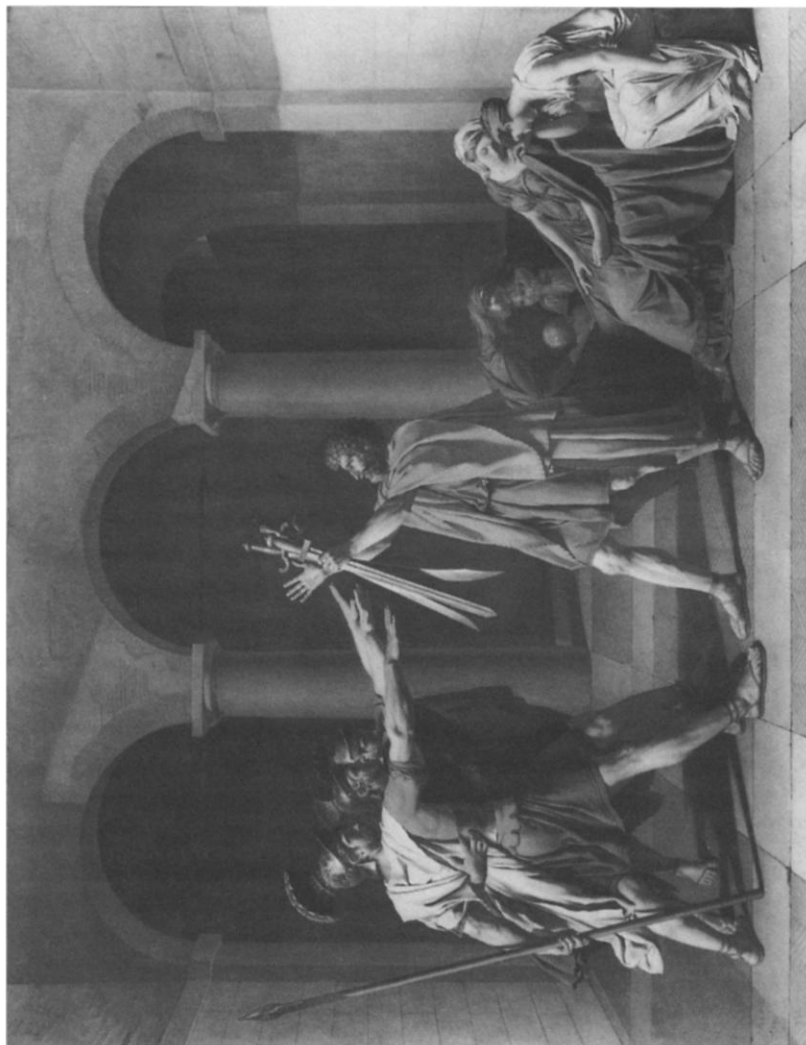


Figure 2. Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1785. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

late days of the Republic, the land of the father is imagined as a land of citizens unified by a founding absence, the elimination of the King in 1792, as well as by a perpetual external threat: foreign enemies. Absent fathers and absent but imperiling enemies. Herein lay preconditions for revolutionary fraternity and self-sacrifice.

The liveliness and sheer competency of Lethière's picture distract us from the quandary of founding a nation upon absences, but the animation of the scene attests to the pictorial as well as political ramifications of parricide: the dispersal of loci of attention. Without the simple patriarchal structure of oath-taking in the *Horatii*, without a symbolic center, Lethière's sons swear allegiance to multiple substitutes; the magistrate on the step, for example, but most prominently, the immense, elevated female personification that presides—impassive and unmoved—over the scene of pathos. In Lethière's celebration of the French revolution, as in much revolutionary iconography, the "fatherland" to which men pledge loyalty is a woman rendered inanimate and monumental. But in order to take such an oath, the crowd of men at the picture's center must look over and beyond a thick wall of persons, representatives of the French polity of a different sort: the row of strangely diminutive, seated government officials, partly obscured in shadow; the brightly lit and oversized naked pink babies; and the large women who hold them aloft. The oath of France's soldiers must leap over these persons. Loyalty to France is presumably sworn on their behalf but also requires an overlooking. Lethière's picture is therefore not so unlike David's *Oath of the Horatii*. It recapitulates that devotion to *la patrie* entails sacrifice, or a refusal to privilege—in some cases, even to recognize—the competing claims that individuals, including family members, may embody.

Of course, the stone female personification is meant to be representative of France's collectivity, to encompass and incorporate those various interests, to make coherent and visually discrete what would otherwise remain heterogeneous (note that she incorporates, and in a sense reconciles, the mothers' gender and the deputies' pose). But Lethière, unlike David in 1785, seems to be drawn as much to multiplicity, to the compelling, confusing variety of a crowd of diverse persons, as he is to political, pictorial, and symbolic simplification. The crowd

of female protagonists, Lethière's painting of 1799 resembles David's *Intervention of the Sabines* of the same year. The latter painting, however, valorizes the ending rather than the perpetuation of war. Concerning David's *Sabines*, see my "Nudity à la grecque in 1799," *Art Bulletin* 80/2 (June 1998), 311–35.

imbues the picture with its vitality, movement, and narrative richness while the stone statue personifying France remains a place-marker within the painting, simply a (provisional) object of this particular act of oath-taking (as contingent and replaceable, it seems, as was Bailly on top of the table in David's *Oath of the Tennis Court* of 1791). For Lethière, what matters is the polity—its celebratory variety and improvised pageantry. He even tries to diversify those oddly passive French government officials seated in a row before the standing mothers; they are variably lit and posed (one turns his head to look up at the demonstrative mother behind him) and they vary in skin color. A black deputy sits at their center (Fig. 3). Such deputies of African descent had indeed sat in the revolutionary assemblies after Jean-Baptiste Belley, former military captain, had arrived as elected official from Saint-Domingue in 1794, and Lethière could very well have depicted Belley's replacement, the dashing young officer Étienne Mentor.²

Lethière's registration of the presence of colonial deputies of African descent in the revolutionary body politic is at once accurate, unusual among French paintings of the 1790s—Girodet's 1797 portrait of Belley stands as the other, better-known exception to the rule—and explicable because of his origins. Guillaume Lethière was born in the French colony of Guadeloupe.³ The painter of *The Fatherland in Danger* was the illegitimate son of a French royal official, Pierre Guillon, and a black slave named Marie-Françoise "dite" Pepayë. Although he had lived in France since the age of fourteen—that is, for some twenty-five years in 1799—Lethière would have been known in Paris as a "man of color" or a *sang-mêlé* (mixed-blood) and also as a colonial or creole: a man, in other words, marked by racial difference as well as by birth in the colonies. He was nicknamed "l'Américain" by fellow artists. With everything to win and not much to lose, the politically disenfranchised "men of color" enthusiastically embraced the revolution of 1789. Their bid for political rights was especially threatening to those

2. On the politics of race during the Revolutionary period and on Belley's as well as Girodet's portrait, see my *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), Chapter 1.

3. On Lethière, see G. Florent Laballe and Geneviève Capy, *Guillaume Guillon Lethière. Peintre d'histoire 1760–1832* (Point-à-Pitre: Centre des Arts et de la Culture, 1991); Geneviève Madec-Capy, "Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, peintre d'histoire (1760–1832)," Thèse de Doctorat d'histoire de l'art, Université de Paris IV, 1997; and G. Florent Laballe and Geneviève Capy, 1848–1998. *Cent cinquantième de l'abolition de l'esclavage. Le serment des ancêtres de Guillaume Guillon-Lethière* (Fort-Delgrès, Basse-Terre: n.p., 1998); Hans Naef, *Die Bildniszeichnungen von J.-A.-D.-Ingres* (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1977) I, 403–20.



Figure 3. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, detail of *The Fatherland in Danger*, 1799. Oil on canvas. Musée de la Révolution française, Vizille.

in favor of sustaining the colonial slave economy because many were educated, affluent, tax-paying landowners; some possessed slaves. Given their wealth, the only basis for their continued disenfranchisement was racial difference, a matter hotly debated in 1791 that led to a series of contradictory legislative decisions. It is worth stressing that free men of color, not black slaves, forced many (proslavery) Frenchmen to turn to race to legitimate the disenfranchisement of dark-skinned persons. The possibility that *sang-mêlés* could “pass” into the French polity of active citizens drew more rather than less attention to their differences.

Lethière responded to the revolution as did other “men of color.” Twenty-nine years old in 1789, he became an ardent revolutionary patriot and would sustain his revolutionary politics until his death in 1832. His charisma, poise, and considerable talent must have contributed to successes achieved despite the reactionary politics of subsequent regimes (and despite his temper, which at one point led to the temporary closure of his studio after he killed an officer in a duel). Lethière’s color, foreign birth, and Republicanism did not ultimately prevent him from receiving the highest honors on offer to painters during the Napoleonic Empire and Bourbon Restoration: Directorship of the Academy in Rome (from 1807–1816); membership in the Legion of Honor (in 1818); appointment to the Institute (in 1818); Professorship in the École des Beaux-Arts (in 1819). These successes are all the more remarkable given evidence that Louis XVIII may have been disinclined to honor him. The King refused to approve his first election to the Institute in 1816; significantly the monarch had also declined the nomination of another *sang-mêlé*, the composer Saint Georges, as Opera director (Florent-Laballe and Capy, 1991).

Traces of Lethière’s difference are few in his paintings. Here clearly was an assimilated “man of color,” integrated not only within France’s official institutions but also within its artistic community, actual and pictured. He is included, for example, in Louis-Léopold Boilly’s clubbish portrait of elegant artists gathered in Isabey’s studio (Fig. 4). Tall and handsome, he stands wrapped in a cape at the picture’s center; charismatic but not the least bit disruptive. Lethière was presumed by Boilly to belong, a presumption Lethière seems to have shared. And Lethière’s pictures declare that belonging as well. The man who had visited David in prison⁴ and who was repeatedly portrayed, along with his entire fam-

4. Lethière also testified against David when he was imprisoned after the fall of Robespierre; see J. L. Jules David, *Le peintre Louis David 1748–1825. Souvenirs et documents inédits* (Paris: Victor Havard, 1880), 221, 257–58, 285–87.

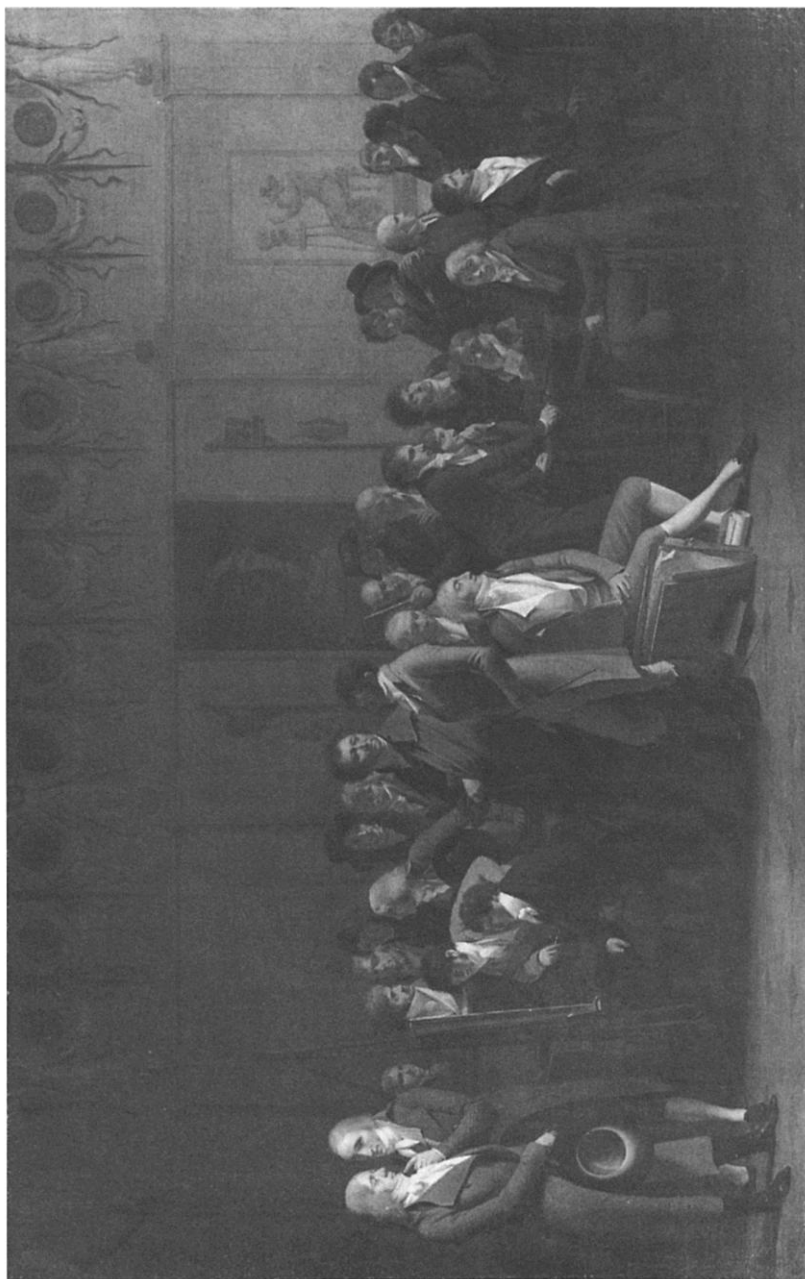


Figure 4. Louis-Léopold Boilly, *The Studio of Isabey*, 1798. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 5. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, *Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos*, 1798. Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

ily, by his good friend Ingres, produced a series of respectable if unexciting neoclassical pictures over his career, often several years after the subjects had been painted by David and his students. David painted *Brutus* in 1789; Lethière painted versions of *Brutus* in 1801 and 1811; Drouais painted *Philoctetes* in 1788; Lethière painted versions of *Philoctetes* in 1788, 1795 and 1798 (Fig. 5). France's classical canon of exemplarity with its cast of Greek and Roman heroes was his own. The black deputy in *The Fatherland in Danger* is as outnumbered by heroic white protagonists in his oeuvre as he is within that painting.

There is one remarkable exception among Lethière's pictures, however, and it is another scene of revolutionary oath-taking, *Oath of the Ancestors* (Fig. 6). The solitary painting within which Lethière chose

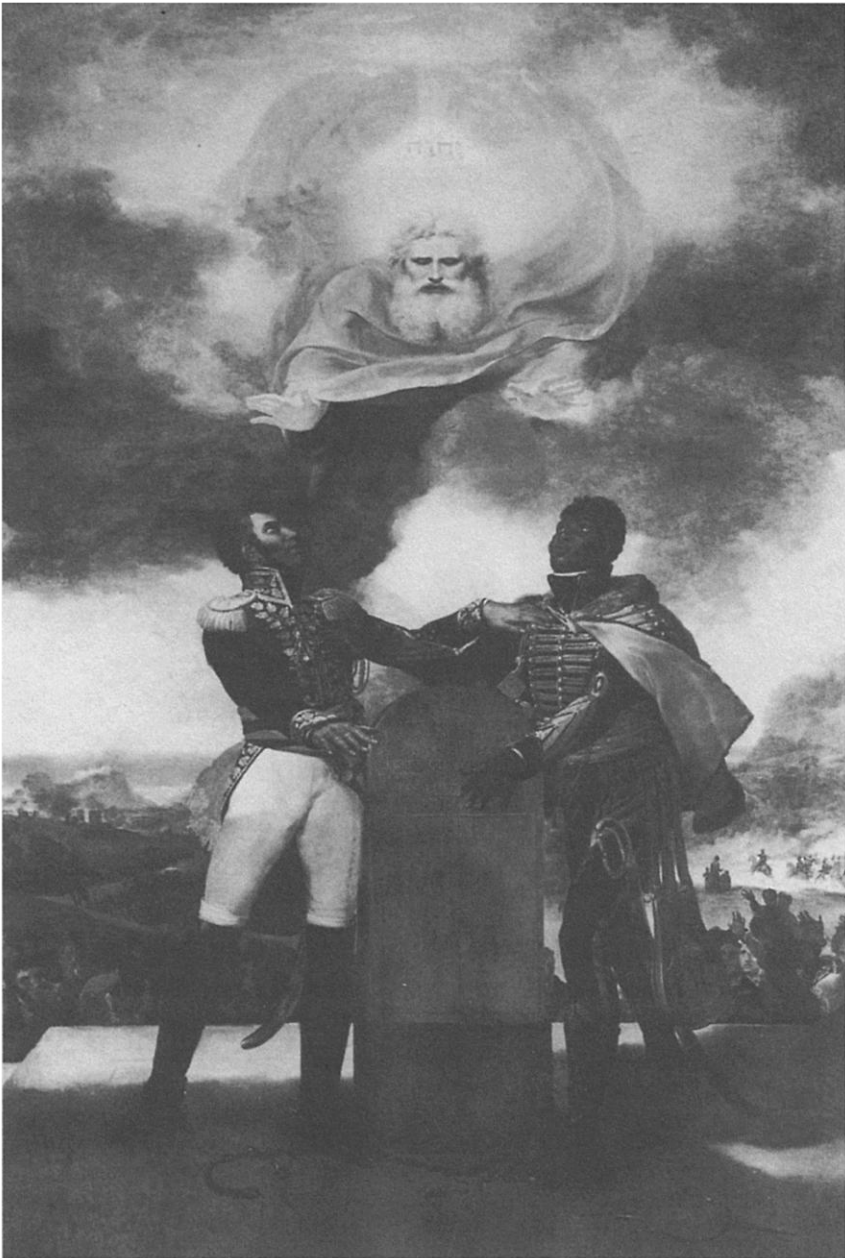


Figure 6. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, *Oath of the Ancestors*, 1822. Oil on canvas. Palais national, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

to inscribe his foreign birth—"né à Guadeloupe"—takes as its subject not the revolution in France but the revolution in another French colony in the West Indies, Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti); the revolution, that is, that transformed France's most lucrative slave colony into the first independent nation created by slaves turned revolutionaries. The Haitian revolution was the black revolution that haunted France's white one; the black revolution that erupted as a consequence of France's white revolution but quickly exceeded its control; the black revolution that defeated Napoleon's troops in 1802 and culminated in the declaration of the independence of Haiti in 1804. White/Black: the Haitian revolution was racially polarized in ways that required that persons of color—those persons who were, to cite Werner Sollors, "neither black nor white yet both"—be subsumed under one rubric or another.⁵ *Sang-mêlés* had to choose. That choice of alliance—in which racial allegiances and self-definitions could exist in tension with personal and economic interests—made persons of color the most unpredictable, potentially decisive constituency during the Haitian revolution. Swinging between strategic alliances with white colonists and with black rebels, men of color ultimately joined forces with the latter: this is the moment celebrated in Lethière's remarkable picture of 1822. The painting depicts the alliance between the mulatto officer Alexandre Pétion—significantly, in half black and half white—and the black slave leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines—all in black. The mulatto Pétion had chosen, along with his troops, to defect from Bonaparte's army in 1802.⁶ The fact that the alliance of mulatto and black leaders ultimately led to their victory and the founding of the Haitian nation is signaled within the picture by the stele over which the two men swear their oath. It is inscribed with the words of the Haitian constitution: "L'union fait la force. Vivre libre ou mourir. Il n'y a de véritable liberté qu'avec la religion . . . les loix . . . La Constitution" (Union makes strength. To live free or to die. There is no true liberty except with religion . . . laws . . . The Constitution).

Significantly, Lethière, the Guadeloupean-born, Parisian painter "of color" made a picture called *Oath of the Ancestors*. The emphasis on ancestors suggests that the picture was a personal gesture of allegiance and familial affiliation, of descent and origins. Unlike his neoclassical pic-

5. Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

6. On the history of the Haitian revolution, see Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Henri Deschamps, 1988).

tures, and unlike *The Fatherland in Danger*, *Oath of the Ancestors* was intended not for a French audience—it was never shown in Paris—but for a Haitian one. The painting was personally delivered by Lethière's son Lucien to Port-au-Prince where it still hangs. The son delivered the father's gesture toward their ancestors in 1823, two years before Charles X finally and punitively recognized the nation of Haiti in return for a crippling debt intended to compensate France for its losses. Lethière's painting of 1822 was therefore an act of recognition, a tribute, made in advance of the French nation and against the Restoration government and offered as a gift rather than as an incurred debt. Lucien's transport of the picture was a covert act, noted by a French "secret agent" in Port-au-Prince when the ship, aptly named the "Alliance," first arrived from France.⁷

Lethière, the Institute member, Legionnaire of Honor, École-des-Beaux-Arts professor, and former Director of the Roman Academy, was smuggling a representation of his ancestry out of France and into the nation that had successfully rebelled against it. The loss of Saint-Domingue was, even in 1822, a loss acutely felt by the French. The debates as to whether France should recognize Haiti fully betrayed a pervasive nostalgic and futile desire to return to a prerevolutionary colonial age when gold from slave labor piled high. *Oath of the Ancestors* was therefore a surreptitious revolutionary picture made in honor of another revolution won at France's expense. In this painting, Lethière aligned himself with the foreign enemies not figured in *The Fatherland in Danger*—the black and mulatto men who rebelled as soldiers rather than sitting decorously as deputies. In 1799 when *The Fatherland in Danger* was painted, in those late days of the Directory immediately prior to Bonaparte's seizure of power in a coup d'état, revolutionary France and revolutionary men of color were not necessarily at war, but they soon would be. *Oath of the Ancestors* depicts that later moment when French and Haitian interests were no longer reconcilable; when the brave young deputy Étienne Mentor was killed; when the patriot deputy Jean-Baptiste Belley was betrayed and died, like the black rebel leader Toussaint L'Ouverture, in a French prison. Lethière's painting bravely refuses to repress the war—the conflict—that brought Haiti into existence. Pétion and Dessalines stand on the chains of slavery in full military uniform and in the distance troops are visible and so too is the rising smoke. Slavery, the picture declares, was only abolished because of these Haitians' valor as military leaders, be-

7. Archives Nationales OM/CC/9a/52.

cause of their alliance, and because of their determination "to live free or to die."

Nevertheless, given its heroic circumstances as a clandestine gift to a repressed revolutionary past, Lethière's painting is, I feel, strange and heart-breaking. The heartbreak stems, of course, from the figure of God. The French patriarch missing from *The Fatherland in Danger* has not only returned but has returned more omnipotent than ever before: a billowing emanation of light surmounting the pyramidal composition (the word Jehovah written in Hebrew above his head). Blanched, symmetrical, white-haired, circled by an aureole of bright, icy blue drapery, the figure belongs to another coloristic and pictorial universe and leaves the persons and land below him dark and obscure, in shadowy earth tones. Indeed the white Godhead is depicted as the light source in the picture, illuminating the far edge of the platform on which Pétion and Dessalines stand and casting the foreground and the stele itself in deep shadow. Of course, this was the Restoration and, yes, the Haitian constitution referred to God and, yes, the picture would come to hang in the Cathedral at Port-au-Prince. But the intensely racialized politics of the Haitian revolution made the choice to include a figure of God impossibly compromising. What color could he be other than white? Was not Lethière a well-trained French painter who rightly turned to sanctioned precedents, among them, altarpieces like Guido Reni's in the Quirinal Chapel, pictures he would have known very well because of his long residence in Rome?

Lethière offered a gift of recognition to the Haitian people, but within his picture, he depicted that gift as the beneficent blessing of a white patriarchal Godhead. This clandestine, indeed rebellious, act by a man of color sadly reinscribed the ultimate authority of the white patriarch. Lethière's painting relied on the patronizing structure deployed in abolitionist imagery (Fig. 7) and recycled three years later in prints commemorating France's official recognition of Haiti: Charles X, hand raised, blessing a grateful personification of Haiti (Fig. 8). At least Lethière showed standing military men rather than kneeling, naked slaves or, still worse, in the prints of 1825, female personifications of the Americans. (Those latter commemorative images insidiously implied that France recognized an indigenous native people—America—rather than an African population that it had displaced and enslaved.) But the syntax of condescension in Lethière's picture and the prints is the same. Recognition is a gift, not an accomplishment; recognition represents benevolence toward a subordinate rather than surrender to a victor.



Figure 7. Charles Boily after Pierre Rouvier, "Soyez libres et citoyens," frontispiece for B. Frossard, *La cause des esclaves nègres*, 1789. Engraving. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

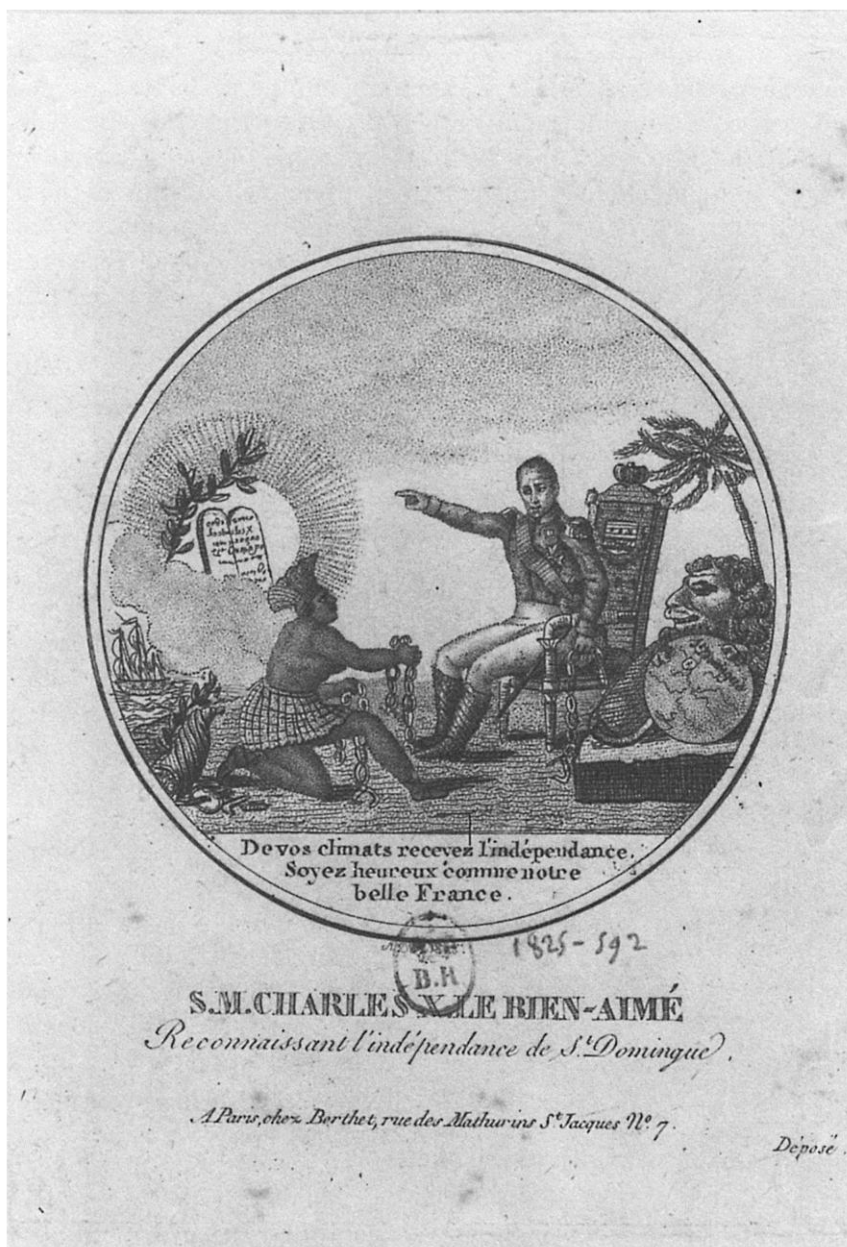


Figure 8. Anon., "S. M. Charles X, le bien-aimé reconnaissant l'indépendance de St. Domingue," 1825. Engraving. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

Moreover, the Haitian revolution, this picture implies, remains incomplete without the recognition of the white French father. The alliance between Pétion and Dessalines, the symmetry that makes their union as equals visible, requires their rhyming poses of attentive deferral to the third term. As in David's *Oath of the Horatii*, the brothers unite by responding identically to the patriarch who organizes them.

It is far too easy to account for and to dismiss the failures of Lethière's picture. The templates offered by Franco-Italian pictorial traditions made the representation of radical Haitian revolution difficult and necessarily cobbled together. The very success of Lethière's assimilation as a French painter and citizen made his strange picture probable: half altarpiece, half revolutionary manifesto; half white, half black—like Pétion's uniform, like Lethière's colonial origins. But I would like to pause over the picture's weirdness, to delay its dismissal (or its celebration) as all that might have been possible. The strangeness of the picture stems not only from its hybrid iconography but from the double gesture it enacts: *Oath of the Ancestors* is a picture pointing back to the revolutionary birth of a black nation two decades earlier (1802–4), but also back to Lethière's colonial origins—to a prerevolutionary past in the West Indies that the sixty-two year old painter had left behind in 1774, almost half a century earlier. Its retrospection is multiple: revolution and prerevolution; its geographical displacements are also: Haiti and Guadeloupe. But the picture is also a picture of 1822, of Bourbon Restoration, and of Paris. Why after all did Lethière paint *Oath of the Ancestors* in 1822, eighteen years after the founding of Haiti?

He did so partly because of recent events in Haiti. In 1811, the black leader Christophe had declared himself King Henry I and ruled the north with the lavish accoutrements of monarchy, while the "mixed-blood" President Pétion and his successor Boyer had sustained Republicanism in the south. Lethière sustains this opposition between black monarchical opulence and mulatto Republican simplicity in his juxtaposition of the military uniforms of black leader Dessalines and mulatto Pétion. In 1820, two years before Lethière painted his picture, the black monarch Christophe had died and the mulatto president Boyer had immediately declared the unification of northern and southern Haiti. 1820 thus marked the reintegration of (black and mulatto, north and south) Haiti as a Republic. Lethière, the ardent *sang-mêlé* revolutionary and republican, would have been pleased. In 1822, moreover, Boyer had temporarily seized control of the Spanish half of the island,

Santo-Domingo, uniting the entire island as the Republic of Haiti. 1822 was therefore an important date in Haiti's history as an autonomous Republican nation ruled by a mulatto president.

But Lethière's decision to paint *Oath of the Ancestors* in 1822 may also have stemmed from more personal events. Lethière had recently been forced, in Paris, to confront and to represent his Creole past as well as his racial identity. In fact, his difference and his origins had become a matter of public record. *Oath of the Ancestors* is signed "G. Guillon Le Thièrre, né à la Guadeloupe, An 1760, Paris, 1822, 7bre." Lethière thus inscribes the painting with both his origins and his picture's; his birth and, during the act of signing, his present. It is the name, "G. Guillon Lethière," that unifies and connects the dates, that makes the gap between 1760 and 1822 (and the space between Guadeloupe and Paris) continuous—a life. The name of this *sang-mêlé* painter was, however, as disjunctive a bricolage as his 1822 picture. At his birth, Lethière had been given a homonym of his father's withheld surname as his first name: not "Guillon" (fils) but, bastardized, "Guillaume." The name "Guillaume" was the extent to which the slave's son inherited a paternal name. Only fourteen years later, when his father brought him to France, was the future painter given a surname. France, not Guadeloupe, required a proper name, but it would not be his father's. In 1774, Pierre Guillon enrolled his illegitimate son Guillaume in art school and chose to call him "Le Tiers" because he was his third such "enfant naturel." Lethière's surname was therefore at once fabricated and a record of his position in his father's sequence of illegitimate children. The painter's name was produced by his illegitimacy and, at least for the son and the father, continued to signal it. The "Guillon" signed at the bottom of the *Oath of the Ancestors* marked, therefore, a later achievement: the legal recognition by Pierre Guillon of his illegitimate thirty-nine year old son in 1799, a recognition only made possible by recent revolutionary legislation of 12 Brumaire an II (1794) which attempted to extend equality before the law even to France's bastards. Pierre Guillon's recognition of Lethière also likely depended on the death of Guillon's two legitimate children—his lack, that is, of an heir to bear his name.⁸ In 1799 Guillaume Lethière added Guillon to the name by which he was already well-known.

8. See Laurence Boudouard and Florence Bellivier, "Des droits pour les bâtards, l'enfant naturel dans les débats révolutionnaires," in Irène Thiry and Christian Biet, eds., *La famille, la loi, l'état de la Révolution au Code Civil* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989), 122–44.

Evidence suggests that the father and son were close despite the fact that they lived most of their lives apart from one another. Their letters indicate, for instance, that Guillon's legal recognition of Lethière was an act they had long discussed and carefully considered. A letter of 1797 written by Guillon from Washington D.C. indicates what he believed was at stake:

This title announces to you my friend, the certainty of my paternity, the desire to transmit my name and my properties [*biens*] to he whom nature designates should possess them and who by his social virtues merits them as much as you do: for a long time, I have wanted to render this justice if the exclusive laws of the ancien régime relative to your primitive condition had not taken the power away from me; and if those now repealing the former laws, and without a particular rule concerning this, had given me the power in a sensible fashion not susceptible to contradictions; which I did not believe to be the case with the Code of Civil Laws of the new legislation. The first question that must be resolved immediately because the nullity of this application would engender incidents more prejudicial than profitable to your happiness, your satisfaction and your fortune, the objects of my paternal solicitude—is whether it is necessary to provide besides the name of the mother, her status, her condition at the time of the birth of her son, and if, an omission would lead to difficulties capable of rendering null the effects of the adoption [. . .and also] if the laws apply to an individual over the age of 14 . . . Concerning [the condition of the mother], I fear as I said above that reticence on this subject will give birth to contestations, [whether] well or badly founded, and that these would imprint [on you] the humiliation of publicity. From all of this comes the desire to know if the Code on adoption is made and promulgated and, if valid, whether it is possible to keep the secret [*garder le tacet*] concerning the status of the condition of she who brought you into the light of day. Finally what would be the real advantages you would derive from this?⁹

Guillon claimed that he had always wanted legally to recognize his illegitimate son. Lethière deserved to be recognized because he was indeed his son—nature designated him to be so—and because he was worthy. But Guillon had not been able to do what he wished because of the law (which deemed Lethière's status to be “primitive”). Now revolutionary legislation might permit the legal transmission of his name and properties to his son, but the advantages of proceeding still might

9. Archives Nationales/476/AP/12; cited in Capy, 1997, 181–86; my translation.

not outweigh the risks, "the humiliation of publicity." Could the white father recognize his illegitimate son without exposing what he called "the secret"? Lethière's mother may have "brought him into the light of day" but she herself needed to remain in darkness. The question was whether Lethière's paternal origins could now come into the light of law while leaving his humiliating maternal origins obscure. Pierre Guillon's anxieties were not his alone. The revolutionary legislation and the debates it engendered repeated again and again that the illegitimacy in question was only that resulting from the sexual union of parents who were both free at the time of their child's birth.

Despite Guillon's concerns, Lethière would be legally recognized by his father in 1799. Nevertheless, twenty years later, Lethière's mother would become the subject of public inquiry. In 1819, when the painter was fifty-nine, his right to inherit Pierre Guillon's estate was contested in French court by a collateral relative. A man named Delpeyron claimed that he was Pierre Guillon's lawful heir, not because Guillaume Lethière's mother had been a slave, not because Guillaume Lethière was "mixed-blood," not because Guillaume Lethière was illegitimate—a bastard—but because he was an "*adulterin*," the child of an adulterous liaison who was indeed excluded from the legislation concerning illegitimacy. Delpeyron's case pivoted on the contestation of Guillaume Lethière's date of birth and the fact that neither son nor father had produced a birth certificate in 1799. Because Pierre Guillon had been married in 1762, Delpeyron insisted Guillaume had not been born in 1760. He even produced a birth certificate for a boy named Guillaume born in 1765 to a "mulatta" named Marie-Jeanne (instead of Marie-Françoise). The fact that both mothers, in all likelihood both slaves, lacked surnames as did their sons—named only Guillaume—made Delpeyron's charges more difficult for Lethière and his lawyer to dismiss. To have only first names was to have less certain legal identities. Lethière was in a bind. He needed the recognition by Pierre Guillon that Delpeyron contested as illegal. He required, it seems, perpetual confirmation by his father, in this case, confirmation of his date of birth, in order to protect himself from the confiscation of his inheritance and the "humiliation of publicity." Short of that, he needed the sanction of France's courts.

He ultimately won the latter, but not without the publication in the *Gazette de France* and the *Moniteur universel* of his lawyer's statement. His story became public. Lethière's lawyer referred to the painter's origins and name as a "modest and naïve genealogy." Since Marie-

Jeanne was a mulatta, the lawyer needed to admit that Lethière's mother was black, not mulatta, but he would not say so explicitly. Instead he referred to her only as "a woman of color." The lawyer pointed out that while this fact might have clinched Delpeyron's case if Lethière had been born in Paris, such circumstances were "far from sufficient to establish a perfect identity" in Guadeloupe. There, women of color were as numerous as white women. The lawyer also admitted that if Pierre Guillon had given Lethière life alone, he may not have chosen to honor him with legitimacy. However,

a lively and tender friendship united [father and son]; even absence itself could not alter their sympathy, an uninterrupted correspondence brought them proofs, across the oceans, of their mutual attachment. Pierre Guillon came to France; his son received him in his domicile at the Louvre; it was in this noble asylum, given by our Kings to the beaux-arts, that Letiers closed his father's eyes. Thus, Sirs, was purified the relationship whose origin was vicious.¹⁰

The lawyer's statement is deft and it is revealing. Neither Lethière's mother's blackness nor her status as slave are stated. The term "woman of color" leaves vague and unspecified her social and racial identity, although it makes clear that she was not white. Her identity, he underscores, was far from certain; in a fundamental way, it was insufficient. Instead, paternal affection plays an important role in the lawyer's defense and so too does Lethière's profession. The deathbed scene of filial piety occurs in the Louvre, the "noble asylum" of the arts given by the King to France's artists. Just as Pierre Guillon had recognized Lethière so too had Louis XVIII: the artist was a worthy son whose "vicious origins" were purified by his noble feeling and by the fact that his merit and his loyalty had been recognized, recognized by France's fathers.

"G. Guillon Le Thièrre, né à la Guadeloupe, An 1760, Paris, 1822, 7bre.": the signature on *Oath of the Ancestors* can be understood to serve as a legal document. The first name Guillaume, which had failed to distinguish Lethière from Marie-Jeanne's son of the same name, is truncated to "G." It was, one might argue, redundant with Guillon in any case and it is his father's surname that Lethière chooses to claim, along with his colonial birthplace, Guadeloupe and, just as significantly, his birthdate. G. Guillon Lethière, the third illegitimate son of Guillon, was born in 1760 in Guadeloupe not in 1765. He was illegiti-

10. *Gazette de France*, 28 February 1819; cited in Naef, 405–6; my translation.

mate but not “*adulterin*.” His father’s beneficent act of recognition was legal and the painting implies, binding—the truth before God, the truth as if his Father was God. No wonder that the figure of Pétion is so much more animated and well-illuminated than Dessalines; the light of the Father brings him into light, the light of recognition in law as in history and as in pictures. This painting initiated by the unification of Haiti under a Republican mulatto president privileges the *sang-mêlé* over the opulently ornamented (read monarchical) black. This is not to minimize the alliance the picture expresses with Dessalines, the former black slave become rebel leader and founder of Haiti. This is a picture not just of a father and a son but also of revolutionary brothers. The problem is the difficulty in imagining from where and from whom Dessalines could come. God does not appear to be his father. The diagonal edge where black and white clouds meet at the picture’s very center descends from God the Father towards Pétion, not towards Dessalines. The black military officer is cast in a more ambiguous, hushed shadow. His only possible parent is even less visible. She stands at the far right of the picture, behind the platform, arms upraised, holding directly before her a naked baby, like the women in *The Fatherland in Danger*, but she and her child are dark-skinned (Fig. 9). The black slave mother makes her appearance in Lethière’s homage to his colonial past and to black revolution, but she is noticed only tangentially, late, and circuitously, when the viewer succeeds in turning away from the blinding light of the white patriarch and accustoms his/her eyes to the darkness.

Illegitimate sons and illegitimate revolutions required their father’s recognition. The paradox is that they required it in order to sustain their autonomy in the world, as painters and as nations. And even under revolutionary law, illegitimate sons, like illegitimate nations, could not sue the patriarch for recognition. Instead, legitimacy and paternal lineage were gifts that needed, by law, to be freely given. French revolutionaries wanted to incorporate bastards into the body politic, but not to unleash paternity suits. Paternal recognition was a legal act that had to be initiated by the father, not the son, not the mother. Herein lay the structure reproduced in Lethière’s picture of the founding of the Haitian nation. We witness the gift. To the deserving but not the demanding. We witness their legitimation. So far from revolution and yet legislated by it.

Paternity is, of course, a tenuous, uncertain relation. Perhaps this is why revolutionaries defined it as a gift, fundamentally an adoption.



Figure 9. Guillaume Guillon-Lethière, *Detail of Oath of the Ancestors*, 1822.
Oil on canvas. Palais National, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Biological paternity could be as easily disclaimed as claimed. By fathers, by mothers, or by sons. Paternity might be where one least expected it. Men of color may have been particularly alert to such questions as well as to their stakes. And they may have seen them in pictures where we see none. General Alexandre Dumas was Lethière's close friend and shared his circumstances. Two years Lethière's junior, Dumas was also born in the West Indies, in his case, Haiti, and he too was brought to France at the age of fourteen by a white French father who bore another name. General Dumas would die young, poor, injured by war, and betrayed by Bonaparte (who could not forgive him for abandoning Egypt), but his novelist son would frequent Lethière's fashionable salon throughout the Restoration, delighting in the painter's tafia from Guadeloupe as well as his attractive republican French mistress. In his *Mémoires*, the writer Alexandre Dumas would pay homage to the painter's generosity as well as his talent. And he would also rewrite, from the perspective of a man of color, Lethière's far-from-original neo-classical pictures. According to the novelist Dumas, Lethière's Philoctetes was none other than Dumas's beautiful, mortally wounded, Herculean father—a *sang-mêlé* who posed as an antique hero and "passed" so well that only son and painter could see him still. Brutus, the republican father who sacrificed his sons because they conspired against the republic, was also not what he seemed. Dumas recounts:

The famous painter Lethière [was] author of *Brutus condemning his sons*, a heroism that always seemed to me a bit Spartan, until it was explained to me later by Ponsard's *Lucretia*. Monsieur Ponsard first revealed this great conjugal mystery, that the sons of Brutus were, not the sons of Brutus, but only the children of adultery: in having their heads cut off, Brutus did not sacrifice himself, he avenged himself!¹¹

Dumas shockingly rewrites the tale of the virtuous self-sacrifice of a republican patriarch. The very sacrifice of sons that made Brutus the most severe and patriotic republican is rescripted by the "mixed-blood" author as a form of self-interest and vengeance against his wife's adultery: "The sons of Brutus were, not the sons of Brutus." Nevertheless, in Dumas's lurid scenario, the sons could be recognized by Brutus as sons. And as sons they could also be killed by him. Ultimately, the father did not control paternity (Dumas's comma is devastating),

11. Alexandre Dumas, *Mes mémoires* (Paris, Gallimard, 1967), vol. 3, 14–15. The son of the General, the novelist Alexandre Dumas is known as Alexandre Dumas *père* to distinguish him from his son (the General's grandson) who also became a writer.

but he enjoyed the prerogative of choosing to recognize or not to recognize, to let live or to let die those he chose to claim as sons. Brutus was the patriarch who wielded this control. Whether he was their biological father or not.

Sons, in turn, could choose revolution and also murder. Parricide was enacted again and again in Haiti as well as in France. Or sons could direct their longing for revolution and also for their fathers into their art. They could imagine their fathers as Philoctetes and as God the Father, martyr fathers and deity fathers. Absences both. In the arts of men of color, familial lineage was at stake but so too were absences and compensatory recognitions. Looking back at the *Fatherland in Danger*, it is worth noting that it is a picture not only of revolutionary oath-taking but also of departures, of voyages, and of families separated by ships that take men elsewhere, away from wives, away from mothers, away from children. In Lethière's life, he had been the revolutionary son who had entered France rather than left it, but his arrival entailed leaving behind not only his slave mother but his French father. Lethière's departures and displacements were not easy ones nor were they entirely predictable. The white father was in the colonies, but the white fatherland was France where Lethière would reside for 58 of his 72 years.

In 1822, Lethière sent a gift back to his colonial past and to his father's, and he sent it with his twenty-one year old son who departed from his father and his birth country to travel to Haiti. The small, shy, fair boy pictured behind his French mother's skirt in Ingres' line drawing (Fig. 10) bravely defined himself as "a man of color"—the secret agent in Port-au-Prince tells us so—and as his father's son, and returned to the colonies of his father's birth. Lucien stayed in Haiti and married a Haitian woman. He died only a few years later, leaving behind a young daughter for whom Lethière would provide (as he provided for his eldest son Alexandre's children after his early death). Familial recognition and adoption were important acts in Lethière's history. While Alexandre (possibly named after his friend General Dumas) would remain illegitimate, Lethière had married his younger son's mother only months after his own father, Pierre Guillon, had finally legally adopted him. For this creole man of color, the chain of lineage, of paternal succession, could not be taken for granted but needed to be made, by French law—the law of the father, and of the fatherland, but also of the revolution. Revolution, in Haiti as in France, could entail parricide, yet it also promised recognition, incorporation, and adoption into the law-



Figure 10. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Madame Guillaume Guillon Lethière, née Marie-Joseph Vanzenne, and Her Son Lucien Lethière*, 1808. Graphite on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ful body politic. Those contradictory desires—for revolution, for parricide, and for paternal succession—could be inscribed, strangely and uncomfortably, in paintings like Lethière's where the expelled white father returns, but not as a man on the earth, and bestows his recognition upon his deserving dark-skinned sons.